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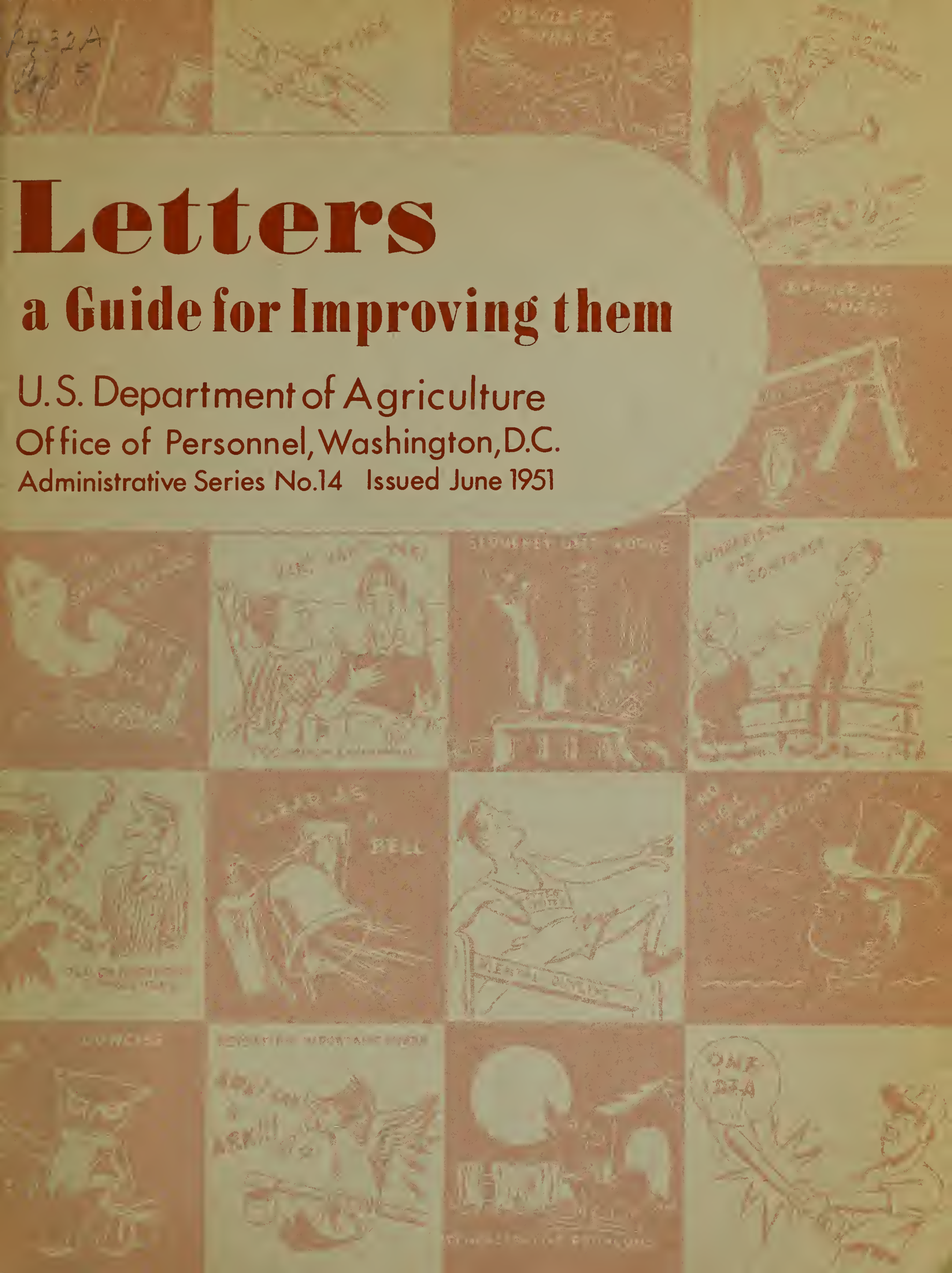

Letters

a Guide for Improving them

U. S. Department of Agriculture
Office of Personnel, Washington, D.C.
Administrative Series No. 14 Issued June 1951

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
WASHINGTON

June 15, 1951.

To: Fellow Employees
From: Charles F. Brannan, Secretary
Subject: Writing Effective Letters

Most of you at some time or another write letters—and good letters, too—about our programs of the Department. However, it will do none of us any harm to be cautioned occasionally so that we will not become careless in the style and the tone of our letters.

Every letter that goes out from our offices should be correct, clear, concise, and written in a friendly and courteous manner. It should be correct not only in facts and in conformance to policies, but it should also be grammatically correct. I like letters that have a neat appearance and are written in simple, direct language. A long, rambling letter with a lot of fancy words and phrases will not set so well with a farmer who is plowing on a hot day when the rural mail carrier brings his letter.

I want to stress particularly the importance of answering all correspondence promptly.

This booklet gives some suggestions which we hope will make it easier for you to write effective letters.

Charles F Brannan

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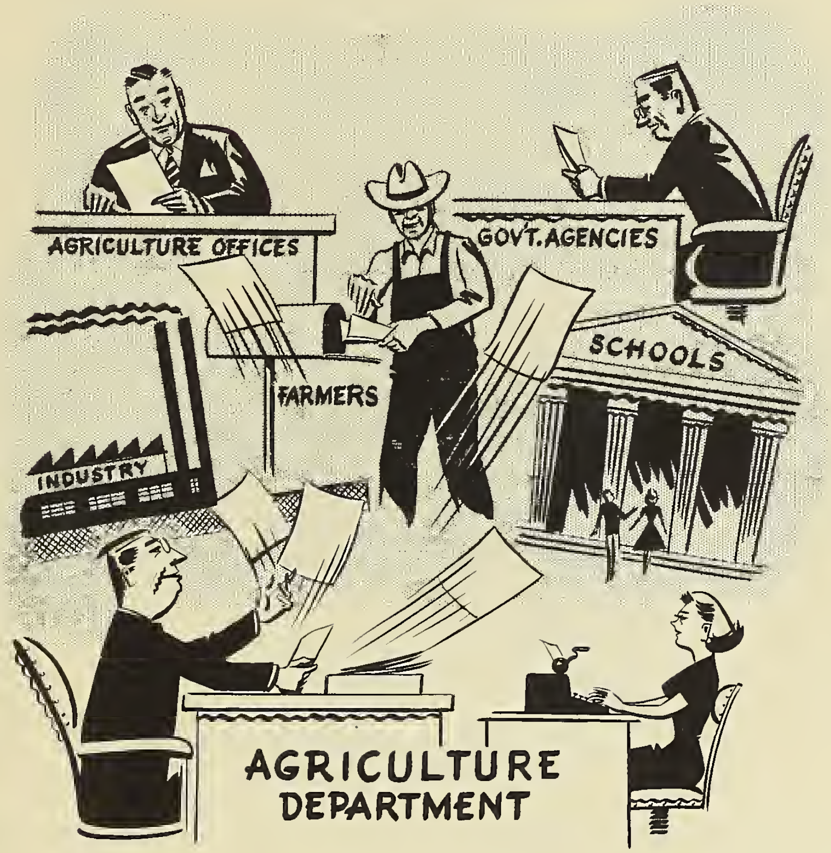
The Farmers Home Administration deserves much credit for this booklet. Mrs. Joyce Burke, formerly of FHA, and Mr. Carroll Cornelius, Training Officer, FHA, did much of the initial work on the subject matter and on the illustrations.

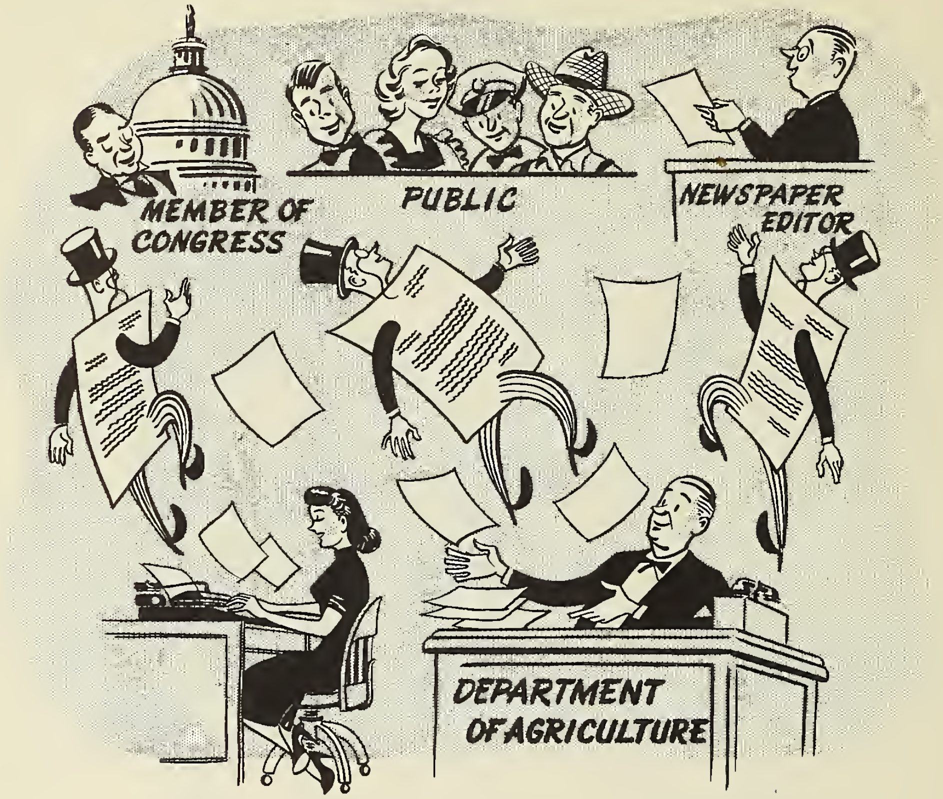
Some of the materials for this booklet were adapted, by special arrangement with the copyright owners, from material issued in *Writing Effective Government Letters*, by James F. Grady and Milton Hall (copyright, 1938, 1939, Employee Training Publications, Inc.).

I. Importance of Letters in Administering the Programs of Our Department


AGRICULTURE OFFICES
GOVT. AGENCIES
FARMERS
SCHOOLS
INDUSTRY
AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT

A great deal of our business is carried on through correspondence with our various offices, other Government agencies, farmers, educational institutions, business and commercial organizations.

II. Importance of Letters in Public Relations


MEMBER OF CONGRESS
PUBLIC
NEWSPAPER EDITOR
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

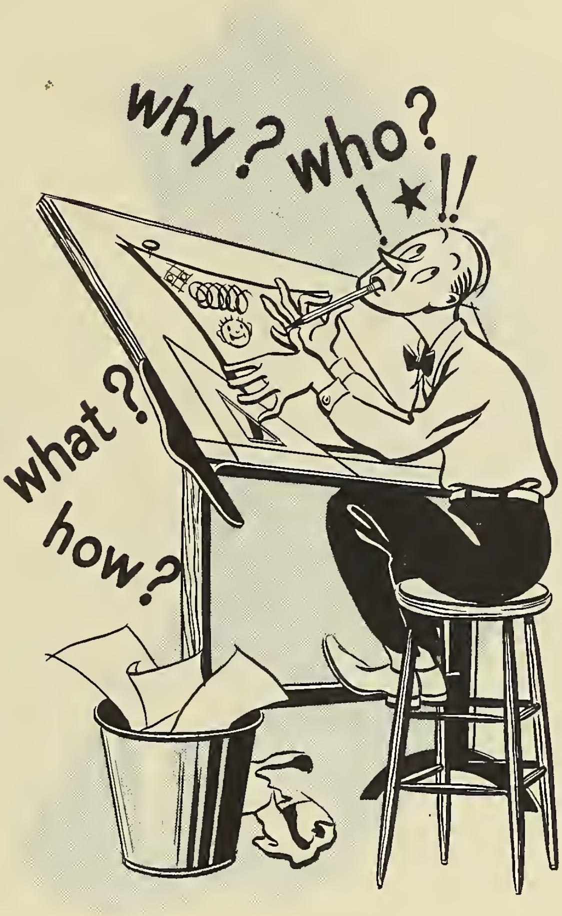
Goodwill Ambassadors

Letters are one of the most important contacts between Government agencies and the public—sometimes the only contact.

The public is entitled to expect prompt, intelligent replies to all requests.

An adverse opinion may be formed of our Department from a single letter written by one of our employees.

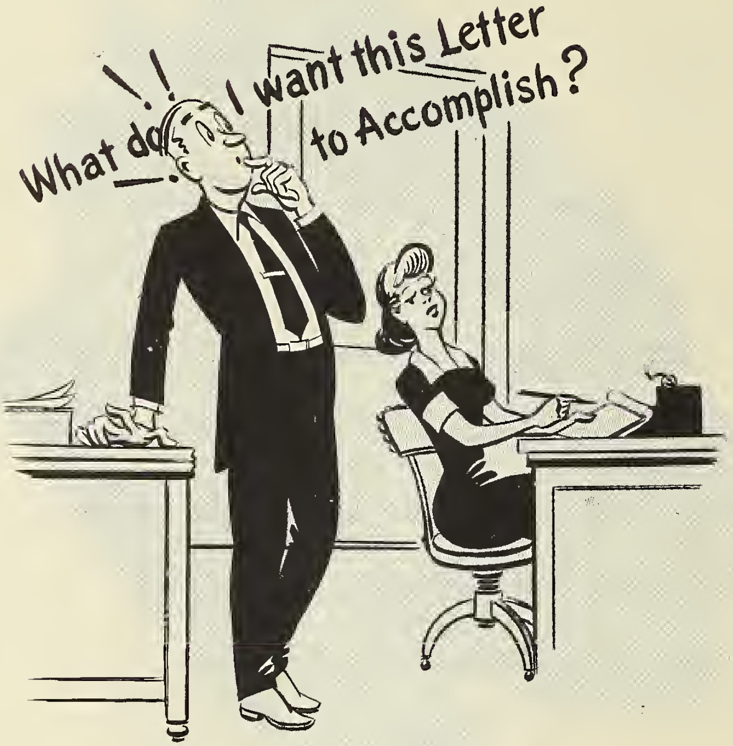
III. Planning the Letter


why?
who?
!★!!
what?
how?

Things to be kept in mind

WHY is the letter being written?
WHO will receive it?
WHAT facts or ideas should be included ?
HOW should the ideas be presented?

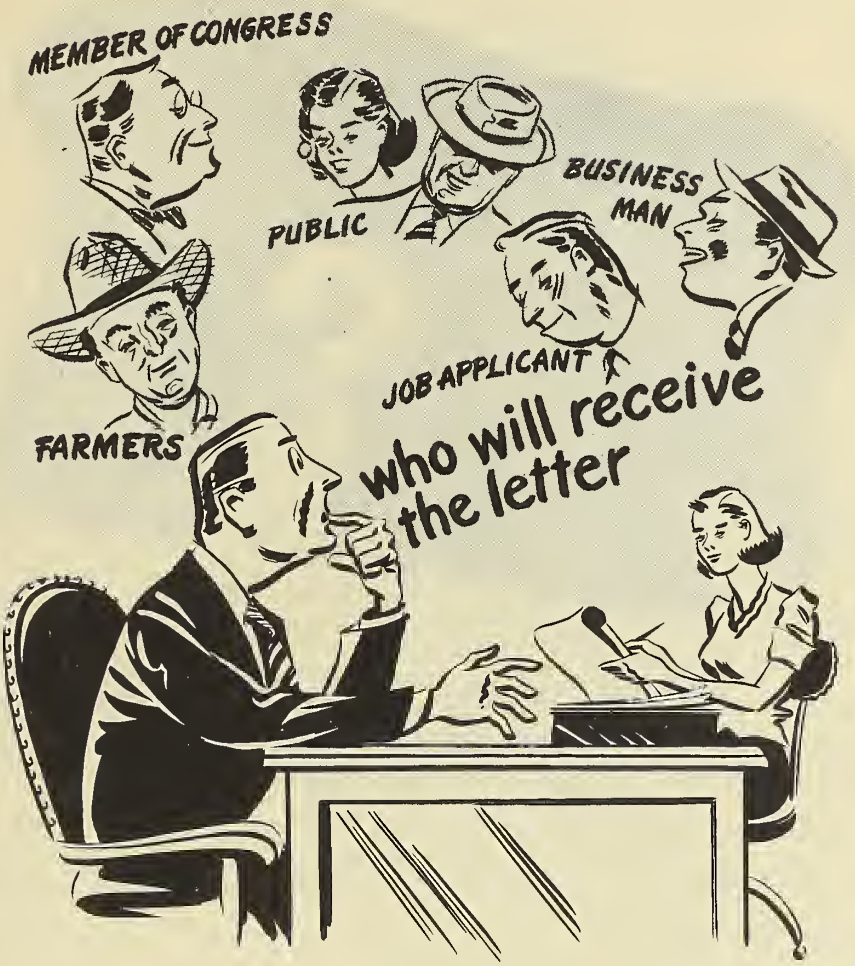
A. WHY is the Letter Being Written?


What do I want this Letter to Accomplish?

Is it to—

Answer an inquiry?
Ask a favor?
Seek information?
Convey information?
Instruct or advise?
Produce a favorable opinion regarding the programs of the Department?

B. WHO Will Receive the Letter?


MEMBER OF CONGRESS
PUBLIC
BUSINESS MAN
FARMERS
JOB APPLICANT
who will receive the letter

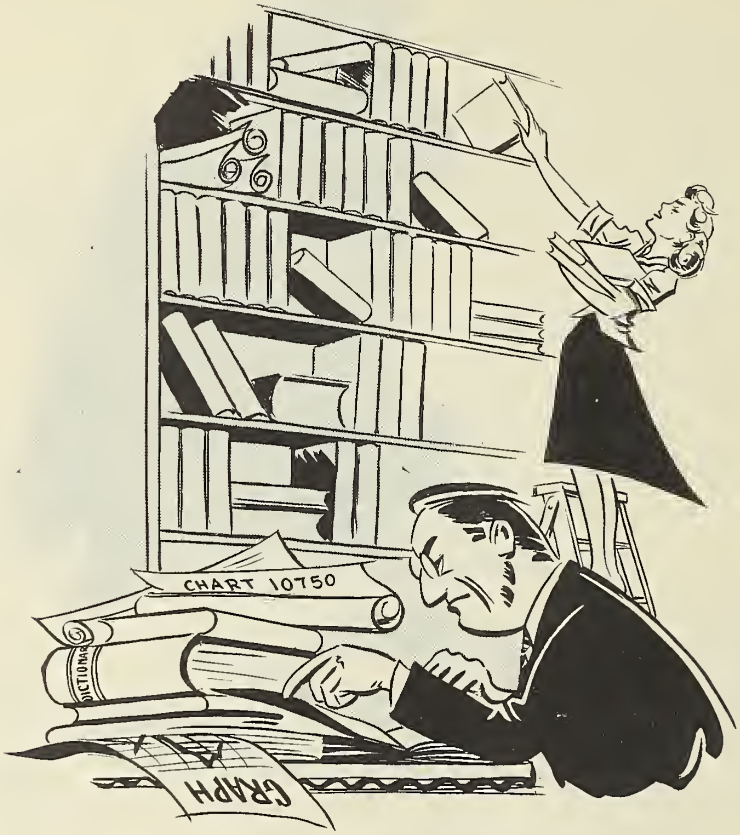
Keep in mind the person who will read the letter; consider the reader's—

Familiarity with our programs
Knowledge of Government procedures
Interest and attitude
Point of view when reading the letter

Have a mental picture of the addressee; try to understand his problem; and adapt the language to his vocabulary.

C. WHAT Facts or Ideas Should Be Included?

Do you know all you should about the subject on which you are writing?

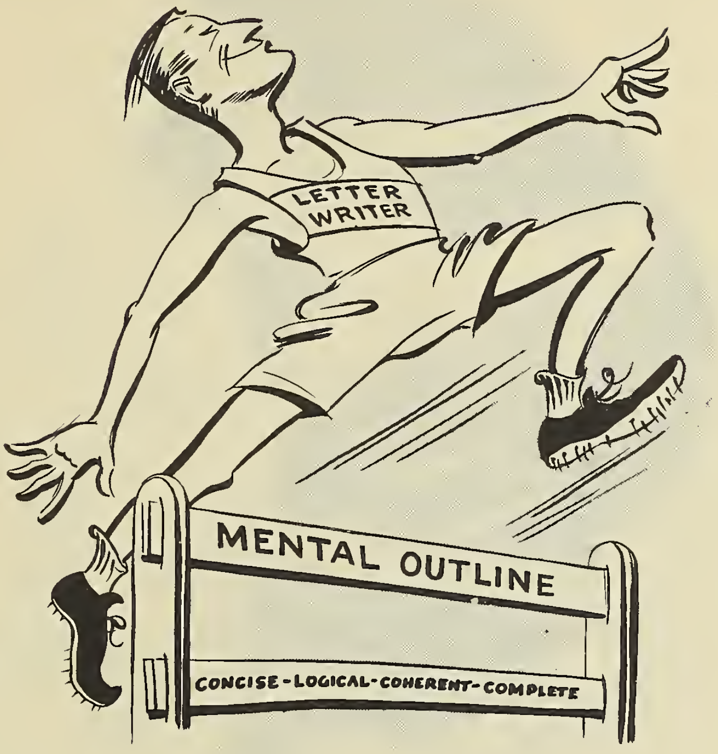


Examine the files thoroughly and talk with other persons who have additional helpful information

Some letters may require the use of facts and information regarding—

Policy matters
Regulations
Program activities
Research data
Statistics
Procedural and instructional materials

D. HOW Should Ideas Be Presented?


LETTER WRITER
MENTAL OUTLINE
CONCISE-LOGICAL-COHERENT-COMPLETE

Prepare a written or mental outline as a guide for presenting your ideas

The outline may consist of—

- Words
- Phrases
- Short sentences

Your plan for presenting your ideas should be—

- Concise
- Logical in sequence; coherent
- Complete; contain main topics to be developed

IV. Building the Letter

Keep in mind that your letter is built of—

Paragraphs—Groups of related sentences
Sentences—Groups of related words
Words—The smallest units of speech which have meaning

A. Paragraphs

1. Arrangement of paragraphs

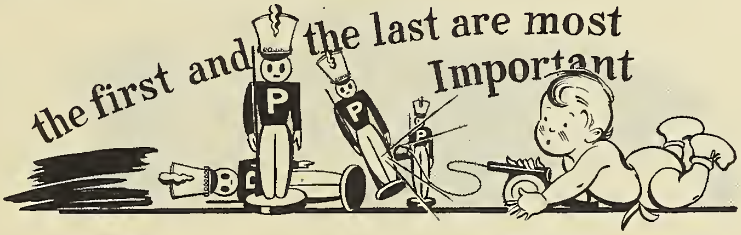
This is an important part of planning a letter. Decide what main ideas you want to present. This will determine the number of paragraphs.

P is for paragraph
P
A
O

Place emphasis where emphasis is desired, by proper arrangement of paragraphs

Attention may be called to an idea by—

a. Giving it a prominent position
b. Giving it more space
c. Repeating it in a number of forms


the first and the last are most Important
P
P
P

2. The *First* and the *Last Paragraph* are the most "strategic"

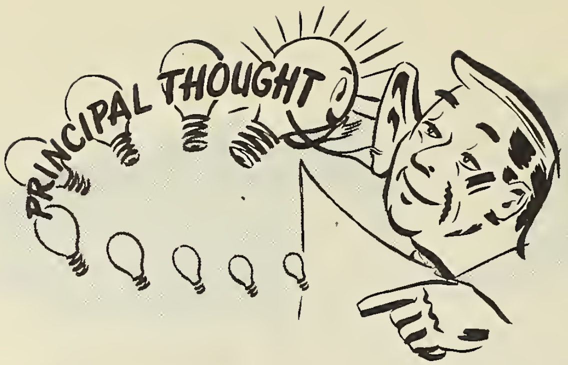
hear ye!
hear ye!

The *First Paragraph* should get "Off to a Good Start"—tell the reader at a glance what the letter is about

It should begin, when possible, with information of particular interest to the reader. It may briefly identify or acknowledge the incoming letter.
Example—"We appreciate your letter of May 7 about the Honor Awards Program."

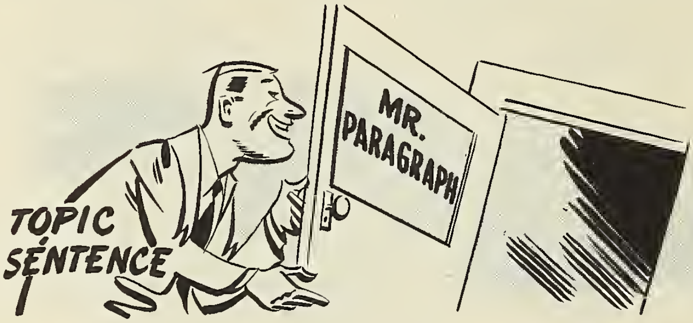
The *Last Paragraph* leaves the final impression

It should indicate clearly the action which the reader should take, if action is desired.
Example—"We shall appreciate your completing and returning the attached form by April 20."



3. Constructing Each Paragraph

A paragraph should convey ONE PRINCIPAL thought; all other sentences of the paragraph should relate to this one thought, developing it fully.



The Topic Sentence

The central thought of a paragraph is frequently expressed in one sentence called the "topic sentence." The topic sentence usually opens the paragraph and should tell the reader what the paragraph is about.

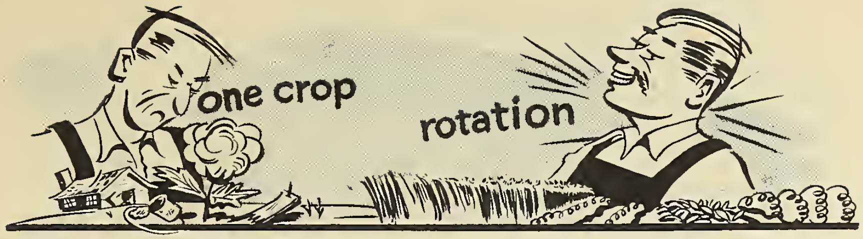
Develop the Topic Sentence with—

a. Facts, particulars, and details
b. Specific instances or examples
c. Reasons—cause or effect
d. Comparison or contrast
e. Testimonies

FACTS
PARTICULARS
DETAILS

Facts, Particulars, and Details

Example—"Farmers derive many benefits from the provisions of the act. Some of these benefits are . . ."



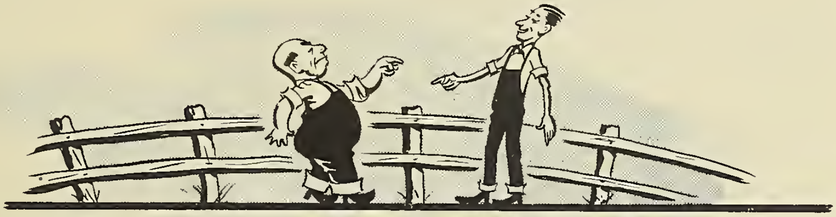
Specific Instances or Examples

Example—"Experience has shown that farming in a particular area can be successfully changed from a one-crop system to diversified farming. For instance, near Jackson, Mississippi, most farmers had always followed the system of planting nothing but cotton. Now, they rotate their crops . . ."

CAUTION
SLIPPERY
ROAD

Reasons—Cause or Effect

Example—"We are unable to grant your request because of several conditions. The law provides . . ."

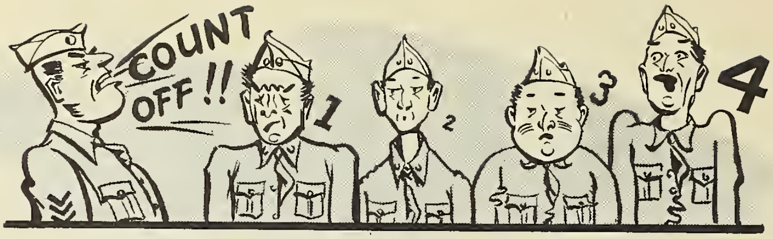


Comparison or Contrast

Example—"Agriculture today is comparatively prosperous when we consider conditions in 1931. At that time . . ."

Testimonies

Example—"Mrs. Jones reports that she has saved several dollars on food as a result of the training received from the Home Demonstration Agent."



4. Sentence Sequence in the Paragraph

Sentences of a paragraph should follow a logical and natural order. This may be done in three ways:

a. Repeating important words
b. Using personal and demonstrative pronouns, and demonstrative adjectives
c. Using connectives

Repeating Important Words

Example—"We shall be glad to notify him that his *report* has been referred to the chief of the division. The *report* . . ."

Using Personal and Demonstrative Pronouns and Demonstrative Adjectives

Example—"Many farmers and business organizations take advantage of technical advice and assistance available from the Soil Conservation Service, the Extension Service, Forest Service, the Research Bureaus and other agencies of the Department. *These* agencies . . ."

CONNECTIVES

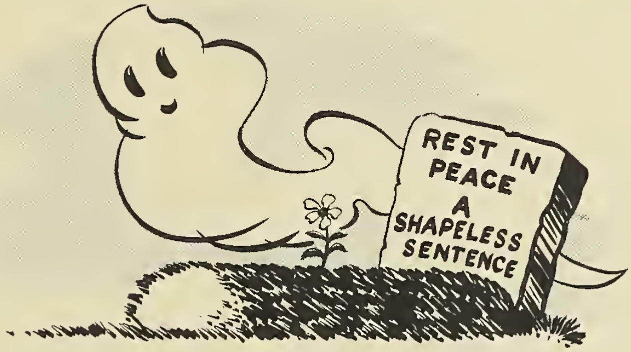
Using Connectives

Examples of some of the connectives which may be used:

although
yet
nevertheless
in contrast to
for instance

at least
especially
besides
in such case
furthermore

consequently
surely
certainly
in fact
therefore

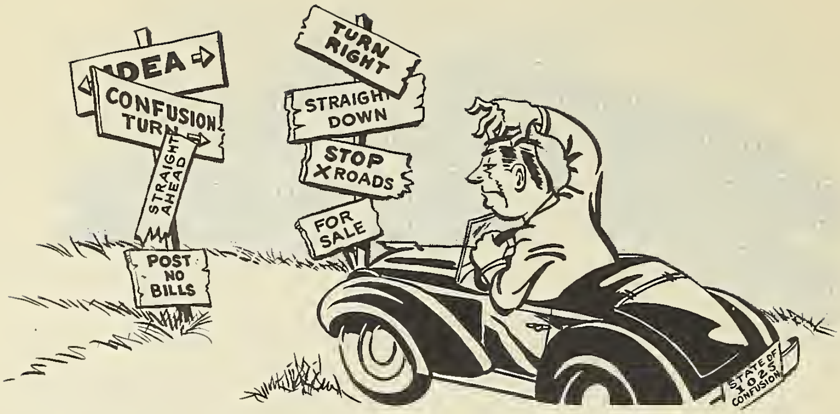


B. SENTENCES

Sentence construction, the manner in which words are put together, is an obvious weakness of many letters. State your ideas clearly, in logical order, and in relationship with each other so your reader will not have to grope for your intended meaning

1. Construct your sentences so the reader *not only can understand them*—but *cannot misunderstand them.*
2. Avoid long, rambling, shapeless sentences.
3. Express one thought in each sentence.
4. Place the main thought in the main clause; not in a subordinate position.

Be sure your sentences *Can Be Understood* and *Cannot Be Misunderstood*



Avoid Long, Rambling, Confusing Sentences

Don't be a "Clothesline" writer, trying to put everything in one sentence. Long, rambling sentences cause misunderstanding, confusion, and waste of the reader's time. If you have the habit of writing this type of sentence, take a little more time to plan what you want to say. Form the habit of using periods more frequently.

Example—(89 words in one sentence)

> "The following rule should be followed: If an employee had completed his waiting period prior to August 7, 1949, the old regulations apply and a recomputation is not necessary; if the employee had not completed his waiting period on or before August 6, 1949, that is, his waiting period was still open on August 7, the new regulations apply and a review should be made to determine that periods of leave without pay or periods of service prior to separation are given proper consideration in computing the waiting period."

"Break Down Long Sentences"

The sentence above can be much more easily understood if it is *broken down* or if periods are inserted.

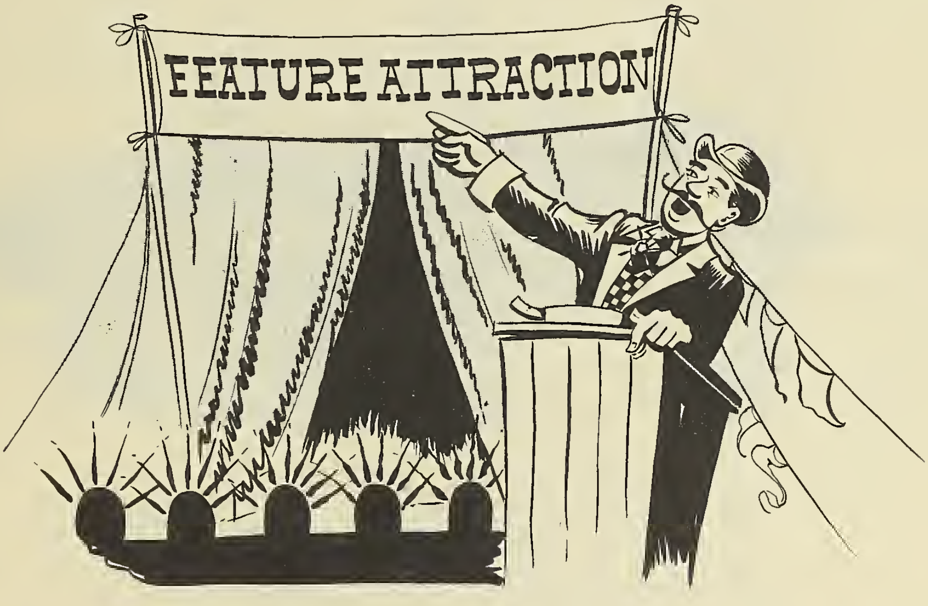
Example—"This rule should be followed: If an employee had completed his waiting period prior to August 7, 1949, the old regulations apply and a recomputation is not necessary. If the employee had not completed his waiting period on or before August 6, 1949 (that is, his waiting period was still open on August 7), the new regulations apply. In such case a review should be made to determine that the periods of leave without pay, or periods of service prior to separation, are considered in computing the waiting period."

Express One Idea or Thought in Each Sentence

Examples:

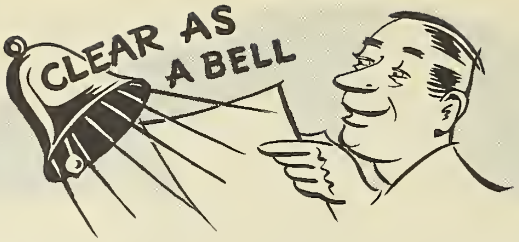
Unrelated ideas—"Mr. T. T. Brown was given the assignment and he is an experienced conference leader."

Stated in a Related Manner—"Mr. T. T. Brown, an experienced conference leader, was given the assignment.



Place the Main Thought in the Main Clause; Not in a Subordinate Position

Weak	*Better*
"We suggested that he formulate a work plan for the survey, which he did."	"He formulated a work plan for the survey, as we suggested."



C. Words—Word Order

Clearness and correctness demand that the words of a sentence be arranged so there can be no doubt of the exact meaning.

1. Place modifiers next to the words they modify.
2. Use connectives with discrimination.
    a. Coordinating connectives join parts of equal rank.
    b. Subordinating connectives join parts of unequal rank.
3. Avoid shifts in construction.
    a. Use parallel structure.
    b. Avoid inconsistent shifts in subject or voice, person, number, and gender.
4. Don't hide important ideas.

Misplaced Modifier

Misplaced modifiers can convey the opposite meaning to that intended.

Examples—

WRONG MEANING—"He *only* is responsible for two counties."
CORRECT MEANING—"He is responsible for *only* two counties."

CONNECTIVES

Coordinating Connectives

Coordinating connectives (and, moreover, but, and yet, or therefore, for example) join equal parts. These conjunctions enable you to express ideas of addition, contrast, alternation, consequence, or explanation.

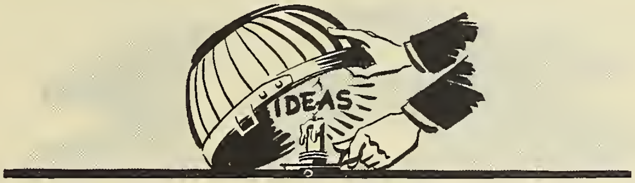
Subordinating Connectives

Subordinating connectives (although, because, since, when, whereas, if) enable you to show the relationship of ideas. Do not join one idea to another by "and" unless the ideas are logically equal.

Avoid Shifts in Construction

Confusion may be avoided by using parallel structure to express parallel thoughts. Be consistent in the use of infinitives, participles, clauses, or phrases. Your verbs must agree with the subjects in number. Pronouns which refer to antecedents must agree with the antecedents in person, number, and gender.

Example—"A number of *employees* will be required to work on Saturday, in which event *they* will be given compensatory time off."



Dont Hide Important Ideas

Place the important idea at the beginning or at the end of the sentence—where it will get attention.

Instead of	*Say:*
"Replying to your letter of March 16 regarding a farm-record study, we wish to advise that the study has been sent to the State Land-Grant College—BAE Committee."	"The farm-record study, about which you inquired on March 16, has been sent to the State Land-Grant College—BAE Committee."

V. Language of Your letter

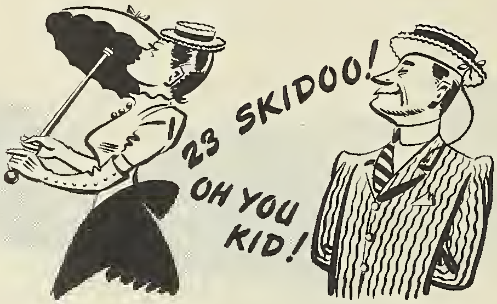
Your letter is a substitute for a personal interview. Use language that is appropriate; such as you would use in conversation with the addressee. Select and use language which has clearness and dignity—which is *simple, easily understood,* and *courteous.*

Avoid the use of—

- Obsolete phrases
- Hackneyed expressions
- Inexact and slovenly-used words
- Too much language
- Pompous, high-hat phraseology
- Dangerous words

Obsolete Phrases

Obsolete phrases, that were used and considered appropriate several generations ago, amuse the reader and distract his attention from the message.


23 SKIDOO!
OH YOU KID!

Hackneyed Expressions

Hackneyed expressions sap the life from the message, and lull the reader to sleep instead of moving him to action.

Inexact and Slovenly-Used Words

Inexact and slovenly-used words make a poor impression, lead to misunderstanding, and may necessitate further correspondence.

"Too Much Language"

One of the most common weaknesses of our letters, perhaps, is the use of too much language. Even simple, easily understood words may confuse the reader when 10 words are used where only 5 are needed.

Instead of:	*Say:*
"Please be advised that we have read your report and consider it an excellent analysis of this important question."	"We consider your report an excellent analysis of this important question."

Pompous, High-hat Phraseology

Pompous, high-hat, highly technical, scientific, and complex words baffle and confuse the reader.

Dangerous Words

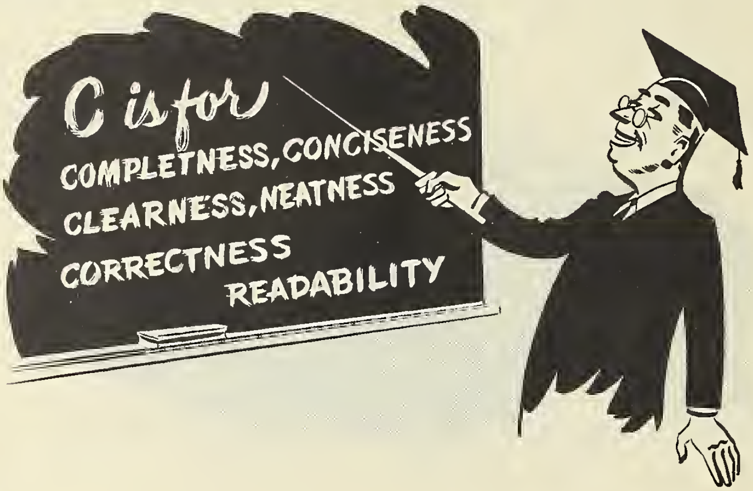
The *tone* of the letter to a large extent depends upon the choice of words. Some words suggest or imply doubt or question; others are demanding; others suggest lack of strength. Such words create an unfavorable reaction and are "dangerous."

VI. Standards of an effective letter

A study of this section will assist you in reviewing letters prepared by your subordinates and in analyzing your own correspondence.

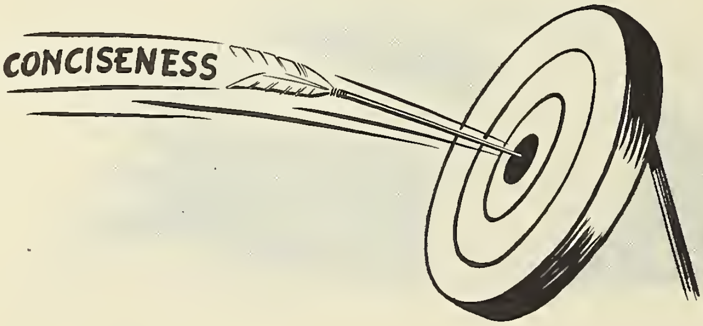
Most of the standards given below may be considered the "C" of a good letter:

Completeness
Conciseness
Clearness
Correctness
Courtesy
Neatness
Readability


C is for
COMPLETNESS, CONCISENESS
CLEARNESS, NEATNESS
CORRECTNESS
READABILITY

Completeness

Letters must give all necessary information to accomplish their purpose. Incomplete letters may necessitate additional correspondence, exasperate the addressee, and create doubt regarding the efficiency of the Department.


CONCISENESS

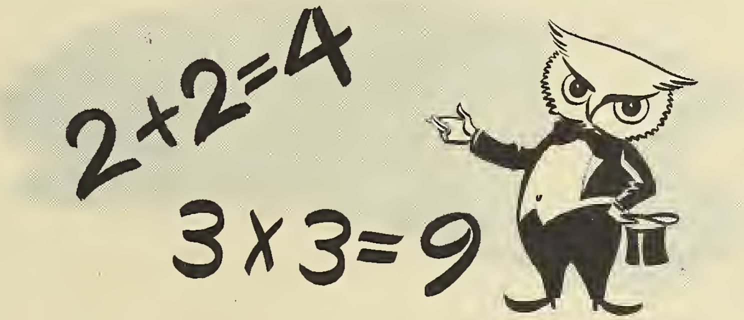
Conciseness

Get to the point. Say what you have to say in the fewest words consistent with clearness, completeness, and courtesy.

CLEAR AS A BELL

Clearness

Every letter should be written so it not only *can be understood,* but *Cannot Be Misunderstood.* Remember, clear thinking precedes clear expression.

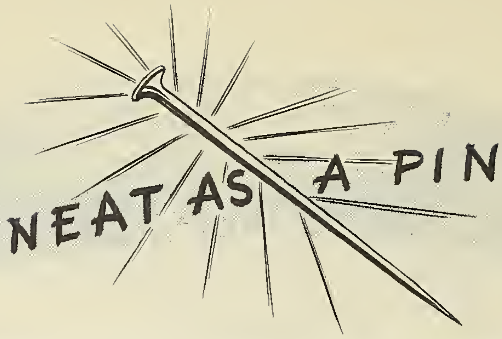


Correctness

Misstatement of facts, and statements made contrary to policy or procedure, may cause serious damage. Also, be sure that your letters are correct from the standpoint of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and typographic style.

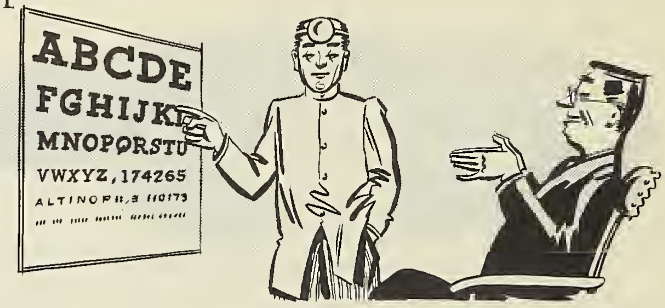
Courtesy

How something is said is as important as *what* is said. Determine the *tone appropriate* for your message before you start dictating. Ask yourself: Should the letter be matter-of-fact, formal or informal, firm, convincing, persuasive, regretful, or grateful?



Neatness

The appearance of the letter usually creates the first impression. Your letters should always be neat, well-arranged, free from strikeovers, obvious erasures, uneven typing, and misleading punctuation. Be sure that your secretary or stenographer understands and uses the Department's Correspondence Style Manual as a guide for the preparation of all forms of correspondence.



Readability

The Flesch Readability Formula, Section VII, gives you detailed instructions for running a Readability Test on your writing to determine Reading Ease and Human Interest.

Here are some general standards—

Average sentence length—17 to 19 words
Syllables per 100 words—150
Use about 6 personal words per 100 words.
Use personal sentences.

If you want more complete subject matter on letter writing, you may wish to purchase the booklet, Getting Your Ideas Across Through Writing, from the Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. This recommendation is made in addition to the references listed in the Bibliography, Section VIII.

VII. Flesch Readability Formula

We Can Use Standards for Measuring Our Writing

Many of us check our weight by stepping on the scales from time to time and then checking our poundage with standards based on height and age. Scales and standards also exist for measuring our writing. One scale available for measuring readability and reader acceptance is the Revised Flesch Formula.

Dr. Rudolph Flesch is an authority on the measurement of readability and reader acceptance of written material. He is author of the book, "The Art of Plain Talk." The text material, charts, and reference to the Revised Flesch Formula have been duplicated by his permission.

Four Main Ideas

1. The *more syllables* in a word the harder it is to read and understand.
2. The *more words* in a sentence the harder it is to read and understand.
3. The *more words about people* in the letter or written material the more interesting it is.
4. The *more sentences addressed to the reader* the more interesting it is.

Goals

Do you want people to read what you write—read it easily and with interest? If so, aim at these goals:

1. Shorten your sentences to an average of 17 words.
2. Shorten your words to 150 syllables per 100 words.
3. Use about 6 personal words per 100 words, and
4. Use personal reference sentences.

With the attainment of these four goals your writing will rate high in *Reading Ease* and *Human Interest.*

How We Measure Reading Ease

Word syllables and the *average number of words per sentence* are combined as a measure of READING EASE.

Step I. If your article is very short, test it all. With longer articles or books, pick samples by a strictly numerical scheme. For example, use the first hundred words of each tenth page, beginning at the first paragraph.

Step II. Select a 100-word sample. Bracket the 100th word. Count contractions and hyphenated words as one word. Count as words any numbers and letters separated by spaces. For example, each of the following is counted as one word—1948; a; 19,892; H. I.; R. E., e. g.; 8.1; 100-word; 9th.

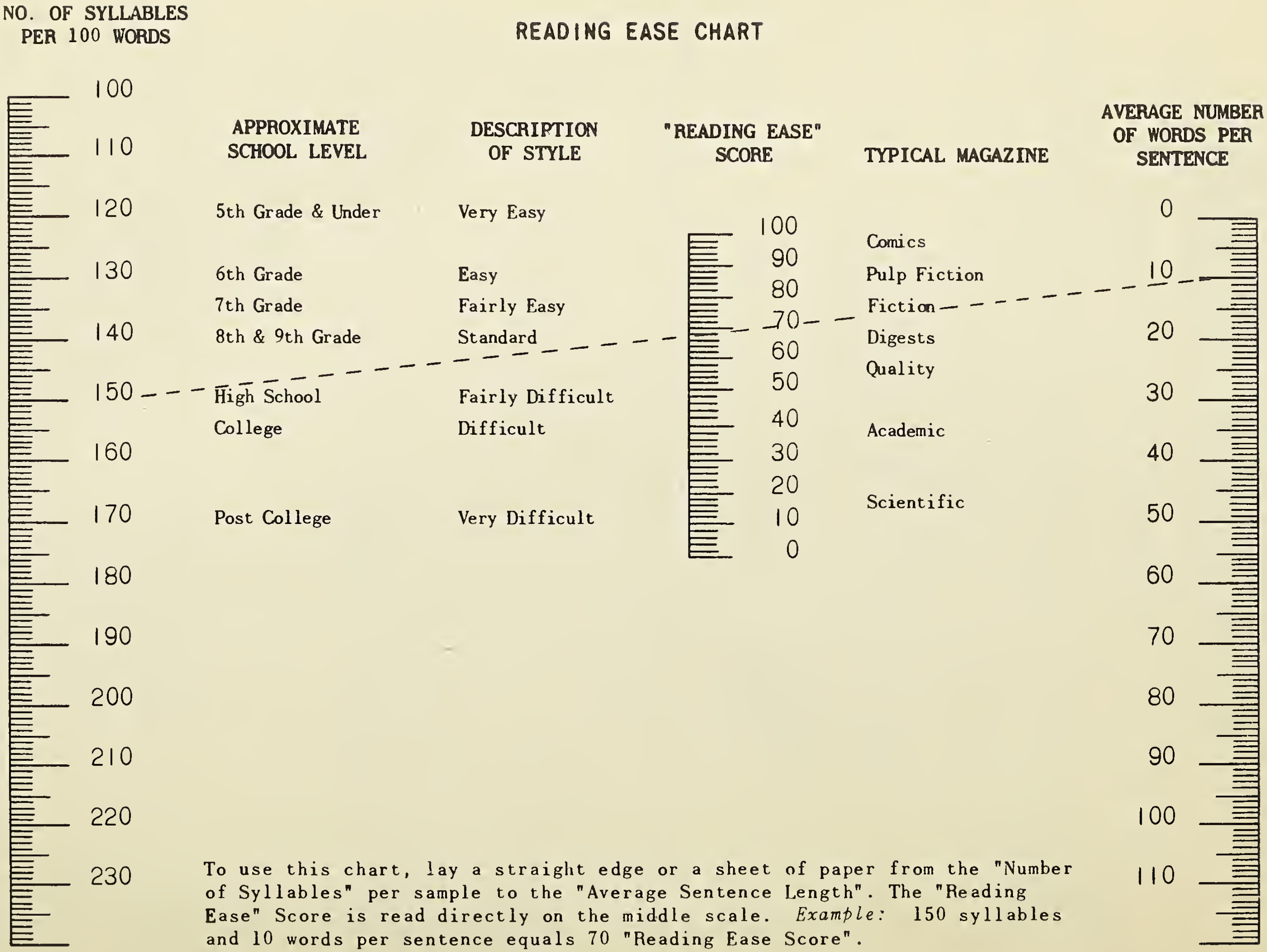
Step III. Count the syllables in your 100-word samples. To save time, underscore all syllables *except* the first in all multisyllable words. Count the underscores and add 100. Count syllables the way you pronounce the word. For example: Asked (1); determined (3); separated (4); pronunciation (5). Count the number of syllables in symbols and figures as they are normally read aloud. Example: $ (2); 1916 (4); 27 (4).

It is helpful to "read silently aloud" while underscoring. When in doubt, consult a good dictionary.

Step IV. Find the sentence that ends nearest the 100-word mark. Count the sentences up to that point. Divide the number of sentences into the total number of words. For example: 96 words ÷ 8 sentences = 12 word average per sentence.

In counting sentences, follow the units of thought rather than the punctuation. Usually sentences are marked by periods; but sometimes they are marked by colons and semicolons—like these. (Count the preceding sentence as three sentences.) Don't break up sentences that are joined by conjunctions like "and" and "but." Apply *number of syllables* and *sentence length* to the Reading Ease Chart on the opposite page.

READING EASE CHART



To use this chart, lay a straight edge or a sheet of paper from the "Number of Syllables" per sample to the "Average Sentence Length". The "Reading Ease" Score is read directly on the middle scale. *Example:* 150 syllables and 10 words per sentence equals 70 "Reading Ease Score".

How We Measure Human Interest

Words about people and *percentage of personal sentences* are combined as a measure of HUMAN INTEREST.

Step V. Count the number of "personal words" in your 100-word sample and mark them with a small circle. "Personal Words" are:

A. All first, second, and third person pronouns—I, we, they, etc. Do not count the neuter pronouns—it, its, itself. Do not count they, them, their, and themselves, when they refer to things rather than people.

B. Count singular and plural forms of all words that have masculine or feminine gender, e. g., John Jones, Mary, father, sister, iceman, actress. Do not count common gender words like teacher, doctor, employee, assistant, or spouse.

C. Group words—folks and people—when used with a plural verb.

Step VI. Count the number of "personal sentences" in your sample. "Personal sentences" are:

A. Sentences marked by quotation marks, including speech tags set off by colons or commas (e. g., "I doubt it."—"We told him."—"You can take it or leave it."—"That's all very well," he replied, showing clearly that he didn't believe a word of what was said.)

B. Questions, commands, requests, and other sentences directly addressed to the reader (e. g., Does this sound impossible?—Imagine what this means.—Do this three times.—This is a point you must remember.—It means a lot to you and me.)

C. Exclamations (e. g., It's unbelievable!)

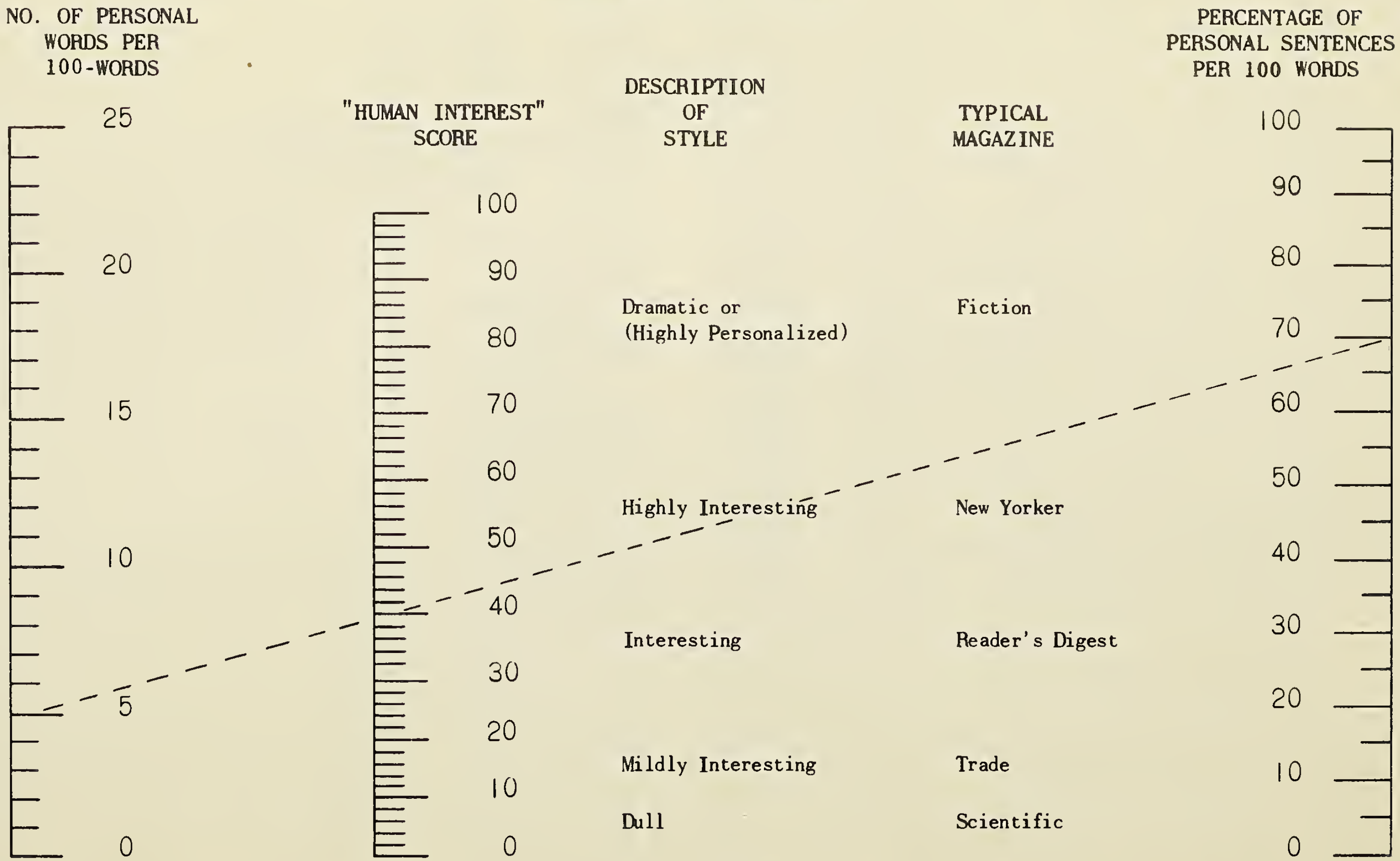
D. Grammatically incomplete sentences whose full meaning is clearly inferred from the content. (e. g., Doesn't know a word of English.—Handsome, though.—Well, he wasn't.—The minute you walked out.)

If the sentence fits more than one definition, count it only once.

Step VII. Divide the number of sentences found in Step IV into the number of "personal sentences" found in Step VI. This gives the percentage of "personal sentences."

"Apply" the number of "personal words" and the percentage of "personal sentences" to the Human Interest Chart.

HUMAN INTEREST CHART



To use this chart lay a straight edge or a sheet of paper from the Number of "Personal Words" per sample to the Percentage of "Personal Sentences" per sample. The "Human Interest Score" is read directly on the middle scale. *Example:* 5 "Personal Words" per Sample and 70% "Personal Sentences" equals 40 "Human Interest Score".

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
1862
1889
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